

COSMOLOGY AND COLOUR PERCEPTION IN THE ASTOR VALLEY

By: ADAM NAYYAR*

The vertical nature of the cosmology of the Shina-speakers has already been indicated by Jettmar (1975:217) and was confirmed in the course of my fieldwork in Astor.

This vertical division of the world view rests on the basic opposition of two broad geographical terms in Shina, *niril* and *kul*. *Niril* is the pure and sacred realm of the snow-capped peaks and alpine pastures, while *kul* is the demonic world of the valley floor and below. The *niril* landscape is characterized by white snow at the top with a belt of dark green conifers and other evergreens below. Among the evergreens is the juniper, which represents the *niril* domain.

Similarly, the *kul* landscape is brought into sharp focus in autumn and winter, when willows and other deciduous plants turn crimson and yellow on the valley floor.

Human settlements oscillate between these two extremes, approaching sacredness and purity by moving upwards in summer, while winter is a time fraught with danger, as the winter settlement is geographically the lowest

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in the transhumant cycle.

Humanity is caught in this binary world and the human locus finds itself where these two concepts overlap and find expression at different times in various rituals.

Colours:

i) The colour terms *nilo* in Shina refers to a spectrum encompassing green and blue. Such a combined colour field is known from other cultures: Friedl's investigations of colour terms among the Luri-speaking nomads of Southwest Iran show that their term *souz* contains the properties of both green and blue (Friedl 1979: 52f.). R. Wilhelms notes in a comment on colour symbolism in the early history of China: "Blue and green were not differentiated at that time. The common word for both was *t'sing*, denoting the colour of the sky and of sprouting plants (Wilhelms 1928:57).

In the indigenous systems of the Shina-speakers, *nilo* is a sacred colour used to denote objects and beings either imbued with sacredness or intrinsically sacred.

Falling under the latter category are the goat and the juniper. It is virtually impossible to visualize an indigenous world view in this region without these two central symbols.

As mentioned several times in existing literature about the Northern Areas, juniper is indispensable here for shamanistic and other ritual practices. Several varieties of juniper exist in this region and different botanical names have been used by different authors. Of all the varieties, three seem to be relevant to ritual and must be picked in *niril* if they are at all to be ritually effective. The ethnobotanical classification of these three varieties is a *dūt čhilli* ("milk juniper"), *ōno čhilli* ("millet juniper") and *deḍōro čhilli* ("pod juniper"). All other varieties are not considered to be important. All three selected varieties are referred to as *nilo čhilli*.

The wild goat (*capra falconeri*) and its cousin the domestic goat also occupy a central position in the thought systems of this area. As in the choice of juniper leaves, the goat required for ritual must also have a *nilo*

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colour. My desire to see a blue-green goat remained unsatisfied for the allegedly nilo goats shown to me were usually for a nondescript grey colour. A nilo goat is then the result of a conceptual transference, i.e., it is classified as being nilo because it is sacred animal, and not *vice-versa*.

ii) Nilo stands in opposition to *lhilo/pilo*, the Shina words for red and yellow. Certain demonic beings have red mouths such as the *n̄i* (Lorimer 1929:532) while others such as the *bala* have yellow skins. On the other hand, the garments and eyes of benevolent beings are nilo.

On the basis of data provided by R.L. Schmidt (personal communication), it is observed that the colour term varying the most in different Shina dialects is the one for yellow.² This would indicate that the perception of yellow as a discrete and separate entity is not developed sufficiently, both red and yellow being contained in the term for red, *lhilo*.

iii) A third colour term to be considered is *šyo*, i.e., "white", a pure colour linked to the mountain tops and clouds.

From the above three colour definitions, we can discern a model containing the elements of *šyo nilo* and *lhilo*, where nilo occupies a central position.

In the hierarchical order of supernatural beings in indigenous belief, we again find the same triple order indicated. The peaks of Diamar and Gutar (i.e., the highest level) are inhabited by the *peri/barai*, with or without their male complement, the *dev*. Similar to the *peri/barai*, but more restricted in their axial amplitude are the *rūch̄i*; protective spirits of different entities such as individual human beings, kinship units and geographical zones. Both *peri/barai* and *ruchi* are linked to the *niril* domain and are associated with nilo.

The *rui* and the *bala* are both malevolent beings associated with the lower zones and are to be found on and below the valley floor. As mentioned earlier, these malevolent beings have yellow skins (*bala*) and red lips (*rui*).

Having examined the three aspects of indigenous perception, i.e., the landscape, the colour symbolism and the supernatural world, we can take

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My contention is that the three colours in the sequence syo/nilo/lhilo (white/blue-green/red-yellow) constitute an isomorphic set. This set is a reflection of the core structure characteristic of the indigenous cosmology. This nilo symbolizes the mediating term in a field of perceived chromatic polarity, in which syo and lhilo form the poles. Once the hierarchy of colour order has been established, we can consider this set to be a prism through which other levels of societal structure may be observed and ordered.

Thus the chromatic triple isomorphic set is a formal template into which the contents of other aspects of thought may be ordered in a corresponding hierarchy, with the same spatial positions of mediation and polarity being occupied by other elements.

II. The Dayal

The above model has been presented in a static manner, the various elements having been located in respect to each other without any interpositional dynamics. This conceptual world of the Shina-speakers is dynamized in the course of rituals where some or all of the symbols mentioned here interact with varying degrees of intensity.

The most intense of all these rituals is without doubt the seance. The traditional world view of the Shina-speakers contains a set of mechanisms by which a linkage between the supernatural and the human world is created. The focus of this linkage is the institution of the dayal, the representative of the human world in the supernatural sphere. This phenomenon together with its counterpart in Hunza, the *bitan* has been described and discussed in detail by various authors, all of whom have been summarized by Jettmar with much supplementary information and analysis (Jettmar 1975:274-281). A short description relevant to this paper follows:

The dayal is a gifted individual, usually male, who can enter the supernatural world in a state of trance induced during a seance. He communicates with the supernatural world in order to bring the human world important information or render malevolent forces harmless through his intercession. He attains these powers with the aid of benevolent forces in the form of

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rachi and peri/barai described earlier.

To achieve a trance, the dayal inhales the smoke of burning juniper leaves. A nilo goat is then beheaded and the dayal throws himself on the bleeding stump, drinking the blood of the goat.

He then dances in a circle of onlookers, looking up into the sky or nearby treetops while receiving the message of the *peri*. The thick white clouds of smouldering juniper, the red of the blood and of the fire, the green of the juniper twigs, all form an impressive picture that is further enriched by the aromatic resinous scent of the smoke and the unmistakable smell of fresh blood, both of which are also said to attract the *rachi/peri*. The dayal in trance also attacks people wearing red clothes (Lorimer 1929:535).

The ritual fire of the seance combines all the essential elements in a symbol cluster: the combination of the composite layers of smoke, juniper leaves and fire present a micro-model of the cosmos. Here too, the central category are the nilo leaves burning above a lhilo fire, nilo again forming the mediating operator between white and red. The intensity of interaction during the seance, however, requires a more complex analysis.³

During the seance, the category nilo is transformed by destruction: the sacred juniper nilo chilli is burnt and turns into white smoke, while the sacred goat (nilo ai) is killed, yielding red blood.

The two nilo elements, *viz.*, the goat and the juniper are destroyed by slaughtering and burning respectively, resulting in the production of two new colours, the red of blood and the white of smoke. Nilo thus dissolves and gives place to a pair of products opposite in colour, *syo* and *lhilo*. Both of these colours are respectively inhaled and drunk by the dayal, thus incorporating and reintegrating them on a new and higher level, thereby enabling the dayal to communicate with the blue-white upper world.

The dissolution of the sacred nilo is an essential prerequisite to create the field of tension in which a seance develops, and the ingestion of the products of polar tension resulting from this dissolution to approach the upper world transforms the dayal into a nilo being by virtue of this union of white and red. In this manner, nilo at the plant and animal level respec-

tively represented by the juniper and the goat are recreated at a human level, enabling the human community to communicate with the supernatural world through the agency of the dayal. A temporary nilo being in the form of the dayal is thus created by the ritual. The union of sacred white smoke and demonic red blood is essential for the creative exercise of the seance, which forms the nucleus of traditional belief among the Shina-speakers. The creativity of the ritual lies in the production of shamanistic poetry and prophecy triggered by a dramatic combination of elements of traditional belief leading to a trance.

That the union of opposite for creation is not restricted only to the seance and is often present elsewhere is illustrated by the following local belief:

It is widely believed in the Astor valley that the female snow leopard (*diyēri*) in niril must come down to kul to copulate with the river otter (*uŋ*) for the propagation of the snow leopard species. The chaotic but powerful world of kul must mingle with the pure but sterile niril zone to bring about the act of creation.

Conclusion and summary

Certain elements of indigenous belief were presented initially in this paper, showing their static location in space. In the second part of the paper, the interaction of these elements was shown by the description and analysis of the shamanistic seance of the dayal.

The separation of the mediating operator and its aggregation at another level are the basic mechanisms by which the seance becomes an expression of creativity, providing us an insight into how the Shina-speakers traditionally perceive the process of creation.

Footnotes and Bibliography

1. One reason why nilo has such a central position and exerts such a strong influence on indigenous belief could be obtained from the natural sciences: "The purer the air, the weaker is the scattering effect, with the result that blue is darker and more saturated to the viewer." (Vogel 1974:238). In the clear air of the mountains, this is relevant and the perception of this colour is more intense as a result.

2. Reproduced here in the colour chart provided by R.L. Schindt:

Dialect

Colour term

Black

green/blue

red

white

yellow

white

yellow

3. The tortoise which (227).

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TABLE:

Dialect	Kohlstyo	Tileli	Drasi	Brokshat
Colour term				
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green/blue	'ni:lu	ni:lu	kiskamo	'ni:lo
red	la'hli:lu	'to:lu	'to:lo	'tolo
white	v so:	v so:	v so:	v so:
yellow	pi:lu	le'dru:ro	'gu:ro	haldzu:ro
white	v so:	v so:	v so:	v so:
yellow	pi:lu	le'dru:ro	'gu:ro	haldzu:ro

1. The role of light polarization by floating particles in the seance must also play a role in distorting perception: "A few drops of milk in water result in a suspension of minute fat droplets which appear blue on observing it directly and red when one looks through it." (Vogel 1974: 227). The same principle would apply with the suspension of juniper smoke in the air.

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